

Love Is A Warm Blaster

by Paul Danner, Art by Talon Dunning

The clean-cut young man stepped out of Loose Cannon Arms, carrying a small package tucked under his arm. His nondescript face blended seamlessly in the crowd of people wandering one of Coruscant's nearly endless shopping districts. No one even spared a second glance when he ducked into a small service alley and began speaking to the shadows. "He's in there. You good to go?"



A quick check of the hold-out tucked away in her waistband told her the small blaster was fully charged. She knew the feeling well... Daniera Karmony took a calming breath, letting the tension slip from her body. She smiled brilliantly at Cabe. "Good to go."

Cabe gave the younger agent a quick peck on the forehead. Public displays of affection were usually frowned upon, though tended to authenticate undercover work and could be utilized if both participants agreed. In this case, it wasn't much of a problem.

"The General's counting on you." Cabe paused and touched Daniera's shoulder "We all are. Just be careful. He used to be one of us, but nobody knows why the man left. Maybe not even Cracken. His service records are sealed at the highest levels."

She nodded gravely and prepared to go shopping...



"Can I help you?"

Daniera looked up from the display of blaster carbines that stretched across the back wall of Loose Cannon Arms. The young woman's gaze casually traversed rack after rack of glistening black weaponry and finally came to rest on the older man sitting behind the counter. The proprietor of the Cannon studied Daniera with a bemused little grin as he casually sipped from a steaming mug of spice tea.

"Actually, I'm just looking around," she said with a shrug. "Thanks anyway." She studied him with a peripheral glance. On second thought, he didn't seem advanced in age so much as spirit. His were eyes that had seen more than a lifetime's worth. But there was also something else there... A glimmer even the heavy weight of time could not diminish.

The man nodded serenely. "Well, you just let me know if you need anything, hon." The grin contorted into something more akin to a smirk as he took another drink. "I proudly offer a 20 percent discount to nerfs."

Daniera was staring at him now. "Excuse me?"

"Oh. Sorry. Nerfs... My preferred acronym for operatives of the New Republic Security Force." He flashed a brilliant smile. "No offense intended, of course."

"I have no idea what..." Daniera paused, then shook her head. "How did you know?"

"Don't feel bad, sweets. It isn't that obvious, unless you know what to look for."

"Such as?"

"It's bad business to give away trade secrets." He put the mug down. "That's why I sell customized weapons... And not the blueprints."

Daniera leaned on the transparisteel counter. "Humor me."

The man sighed with feigned reluctance for a moment. "Well, I don't get many female browsers in here and the few that do come by usually get caught up with the junk in those cases," he said, indicating the one she was leaning on. "Cutesy little palm blasters, hold-outs with pearl lacquer finish that fit comfortably in the handbag, that sort of thing."

Daniera started to protest, but he cut her off before she could get out a single syllable. "That's all fact by the way, free of sexist opinion. Anyway, you were eyeing the good stuff on the back wall, appreciating some of my better work, and that means you're not a casual enthusiast. Then there's that bulge in your jacket that," he flashed the spotluma grin again, "assuming no odd physical abnormalities, looks to me just like a BlasTech CMP 489 pistol - flavor of the moment for Republic Security."

Daniera folded her arms across her chest. "You're pretty good, but -- "

He held up a hand. "You didn't let me finish... However, you're a bit too much of a looker for standard Security or even SpecForce, so my guess would be NRI. I know how that old bantha Cracken loves to throw folks a curve by utilizing attractive women..." After a final, triumphant sip of tea, he added, "Well, at least when their mouths aren't dangling open like that. Kind of subtracts from the enchantress equation." He sat back in the chair and beamed. "So, any questions?"

After taking a moment to regain her composure she nodded. "Just one... What in the galaxy possessed the great M'Kyas Love to let his considerable talents go to waste appraising customers in a back-end weapon shop on Coruscant?"

"For your information, I only sell high-quality merchandise, and..." His eyes narrowed dangerously. "My custom creations sell for more credits than you've probably seen in your lifetime, girl."

"You'd be surprised."

"Well, now I know who you are and you know who I am." He picked up his empty mug and started walking to the back of the store. "I dislike playing games with no wagering involved, so why don't you just save us both some lifetime and tell me what you want."

"Grandyl Grieve."

To her credit, Daniera didn't flinch as the mug hit the floor and shattered.

M'Kyas Love slowly turned back around to face her. With the touch of a button, the lumasign on his front door flashed from 'OPEN' to 'CLOSED'.

He slowly held out a hand, gesturing Daniera toward a back room.

"Let's talk."



"Grandyl Grieve... Now there's a name I haven't heard for a long time." Love slid a steaming mug of tea in front of Daniera and sat down beside her. "A fellow Latarzian and one of the deadliest assassins ever spawned by the Empire. Erroneously believed to be deceased many times over, he has the annoying habit of surviving certain doom. As I recall, he hasn't been heard from since the Battle of Endor. That was quite a few years ago..."

Daniera cautiously took a sip of the proffered tea, decided she liked it and let the hot liquid warm her up. "Well, he's back. Hired by an unknown Imperial party to assassinate key officials of the New Republic." She returned the mug to its coaster with a resounding thump. "And so far he's doing a marvelous job."

Love leaned back in his chair. "Back after all this time, huh?" He shrugged. "I thought he'd retired."

Daniera cocked an eyebrow. "You don't seem too concerned by the news of his return."

"Should I be?"

"As the story goes, it was your relentless pursuit that finally drove him underground. And since Grieve is apparently taking up old hobbies, don't you think he'd love to take a shot at his arch-nemesis?"

"I think you've been watching too many holos, girl."

"The reality is people are dying. Another senator was found murdered this morning. That makes four in less than two weeks. Each one more important than the last..."

"I thought the New Republic espoused equality," he said with a chuckle.

"You know what I mean," Daniera snapped, growing more irritated. "So far we're snapping at shadows. No one even knows what the sithspawn looks like."

"I do." He paused. "And that's why you're here."

"There has only been one break so far. Our agents have uncovered the identity of Grieve's next target... Chief of State Leia Organa Solo." Daniera took a deep breath before continuing. "You got closer to this monster than anyone else. We need your help."

He shook his head. "Grieve may not be retired, but I am. I've done more than my share of skip tracing, bounty hunting, private investigating, and sector rangering. I served my time in the nerfs and played superspy for General Cracken." Love stood up, his eyes locked onto Daniera. "So you can go back and tell Cracken that my remaining years are going to be spent doing things that don't involve being shot, tortured, or otherwise mauled."

Daniera was silent for a long moment, than abruptly got to her feet. She was at the door in a few short strides, but paused briefly to regain eye contact with Love. "General Cracken thought you might refuse. He told me to give you this..." She slipped something into his hand and then walked toward the front door without another word.

Love reluctantly glanced down at the data chip, carefully running his fingers along the gleaming ridged surface. It had been erased. Cracken did love his irony, after all.... "Wait."

One hand on the door, Daniera looked at him over her shoulder.

He touched a finger to the wall and a secret panel slid away to reveal a recessed compartment. From inside Love removed a large replihide shoulder holster that cradled what was quite possibly the nastiest-looking heavy blaster pistol Daniera had ever seen. Surprisingly, its bulk slipped easily into place under Love's left arm. He shrugged on a worn, but expensive, overcoat that easily concealed the huge weapon.

"Okay. I'm ready."

It was Daniera's turn to smirk. "For what?"

"I don't know, hon," he said, patting the bulge under his coat, "but with the mood I'm in right now it had better involve a lot of shooting at people..."



The New Republic Security detail at the door watched quietly as Daniera and Love exited the turbolift and made their way down the hall. The pair of heavily-armed troopers shifted their weight slightly, greeting the newcomers with the business end of two blaster carbines.

Daniera flashed her identification and the guards immediately stood at ease, allowing them passage into the hotel room. She stepped in first, pulling on a pair of Duraguard examination gloves.

Love paused, glancing back down the hall at the teams of NRI agents electronically sweeping the area for the tiniest clues. He shrugged as he followed Daniera into the room, closing the door behind them.

She was already moving methodically through the living area. "The entire floor has been shut down by Republic Security. As we speak, NRI agents are interviewing the entire staff, conducting molecular-level scans, and reviewing guest records for the past month."

Love nodded. "That's good. A waste of time and money, but hey, a bureaucracy is still a bureaucracy no matter how high-minded its morals may be."

Daniera stared at him, her mouth struggling to catch up to her thoughts.

He held up a hand. "Sorry. Just give me the specs, okay... Say, do you mind if I call you Dani?"

"Yes."

"Good. Go ahead, Dani..."

Daniera sighed. "Victim number four is Senator Luralon Odaay, near-human Turian from the Limbala Sector. He was 47 standard years of age, married, with one child. Senator Odaay frequently returns to his homeworld when the Senate-in-whole is adjourned, so when it is in session, he only keeps a hotel room in lieu of permanent Coruscant residence." She gestured at the well-kept room. "The Kaerlia Queen has been his favorite the last few years. In fact, he requested this same room last year."

Love absorbed the information. "No sign of forced entry and the murder took place..." His eyes searched out the entrance to the bedroom. "In there?"

Daniera nodded her head slowly, apparently unenthused about revisiting the crime scene.

He walked past her, slipping on a pair of Duraguard gloves. "How do you know it's Grieve?"

"Bloody and violent death."

"Most homicides fall into that category..."

"And the sithspawn left his calling card... Grieve," she hissed through clenched teeth, "What kind of name is that, anyway?"

"Latarzian. At birth we're only given our first names. Our surnames are earned from our actions."

"But 'Grieve'?"

His voice became distant. "His parents probably lamented the fact that they gave birth to him."

Daniera gave him a look. "Then I'm not sure I want to know..."

"What?"

"About your surname... Love?"

He offered only a leering smile and a wink. "Ask me again sometime."

Love flashed her a morbid smile of amusement, then entered the bedroom.



Senator Odaay's corpse was strewn face down across the emperor-sized bed. The thick sheets had absorbed most of the dark blue blood; the plush Tapani carpet had soaked up the rest. A gold-handled vibroknife was jutting out from the small of the victim's back. Certainly not the killing blow, probably inflicted post-mortem. Grandyl Grieve's personalized calling card, derived from his name - Grandyl was the Latarzian word for gold.

Love paused at the entrance, surveying the scene for a full minute before approaching the victim's body.

Daniera quietly slid into the room behind him. For her tough demeanor and experience, she was still a young agent - new to many horrors of the business.

He glanced back at her and smiled reassuringly. "You know what the problem is with beings today?"

She shook her head, eyes focused on the grisly sight.

"Well, I'll tell you. Nobody can ever keep their snouts out of everybody else's business. The galaxy would be a nicer place if we all just minded to our own affairs." Love crouched down over the body, conducting a careful examination. The man had flopped over the bed, one six-fingered hand draped across a pillow. The other was hanging over the far side of the bed. Love circled around to get a better look. It was clenched in a tight fist. "Fact is, 45 percent of homicide customers are stiff 'cause they followed their sense of smell to the great beyond..."

He had her attention, now. Daniera folded her arms and just stared at him. "Is that so?"

"Yup," Love said through gritted teeth as he tried to pry open the dead man's fist. "That reminds me... You know what the least used sense is?"

She watched him struggle with the corpse, and shrugged noncommittally.

"Common sense," Love grunted as he accidentally snapped off two fingers. Senator Odaay had been clenching a tiny figurine.

Shocked, Daniera quickly stepped forward.

Love used his arm to wipe the sweat beading at his forehead. "The other 45 percent are your typical crimes of passion," he said with a salacious wink. "Nothing sours as badly as love. Well, except maybe lum."

"Do you ever shut up?" she said as she stepped next to him.

"The last 10 percent are your basic poor shlubs who just get caught in the crossfire." He turned the statuette over and over in his hands. It was a rather stunning likeness of Darth Vader. "Funny thing is, folks are the most worried about being plugged in the last category. They ask me how they can avoid getting hit. I tell 'em all the same thing..." He twisted the little Lord of the Sith's head with an audible click.

"Duck." Daniera watched in amazement as a miniature lightsaber hologram emitted from the tiny gloved hand. Love handed her the Vader replica and she carefully touched the small saber. It sparked slightly, giving her a minute shock.

Love carefully turned the corpse over onto its back and studied the carnage. The dead Senator sported a massive hole in the center of his chest, ringed with obvious blaster scoring.

Love studied the mortal wound for a moment, giving a low whistle through his teeth.

He started to move back, then paused. He abruptly leaned forward until his nose was nearly touching the dead Senator's neck and sniffed. "Hmmm..."

Daniera turned Vader's head, disengaging the lightsaber with a tiny whoosh. "So what do we have?"

"I got a corpse that took what looks like a blaster artillery hit at point-blank range." Love turned back to Daniera. "I got no witnesses, no point of entry, and no defensive wounds."

"Just like the other three crime scenes." Daniera couldn't resist a self-satisfied smile. "You haven't told me anything I didn't already know."

Love continued as if she hadn't even spoken. "The only thing I do have is a good hunch that our boy here was a member of the Dark Vortex Club."

Daniera's smug smile suddenly vanished.

Love unceremoniously walked to the door, tossing the used Duraguard gloves over his shoulder. "And all you got, sweets, is a big mess to clean up. My work here is done."

She trailed him outside the hotel room. "That's it?"

"I just gave you all you needed to solve this case," he said, indicating the statuette in her hands. "That's a membership key to the club. But I'm sure you probably already knew that, too."

Daniera stopped for a moment, but Love continued on down the hall. "Well, I would have found this myself..." Then she added under her breath, "Sooner or later."

"Good luck," he called over his shoulder as he entered the turbolift. "If you succeed, I'll send you a beautiful bouquet. If not, I guess I'll send 'em to Organa Solo's funeral."

Love winked at her just before the doors shut and he vanished out of sight.



General Cracken turned the small figurine of Darth Vader over and over in his hands. "Not so intimidating at 1/1000 scale, is he?"

Cabe was pacing the office, irritated. "We don't need Love, General."

A ghost of a smile played on Cracken's lips. "Come now. We all need love," the General said softly.

Cabe was too busy ranting to catch the joke. "This is a waste of time and manpower at an inopportune moment."

Cracken raised his eyebrows, studying the Major. "So you feel I am making a mistake, Cabe?"

The NRI agent stopped his pacing for a moment. "With all due respect, General..."

Cracken held up a hand and grinned. "You can stop there. No good news ever begins with that statement." He glanced over at Daniera, who was mercifully seated and up to this point, silent. "What do you think?"

"Love is annoying, egotistical, and utterly devoid of honor." Cabe smirked at her confirmation, but then Daniera thought for a moment. "But he is also intelligent, perceptive, and very experienced."

That wiped away Cabe's smile and brought one to Cracken's lips.

"We could use his help," she continued, "however we can't count on it. This may fall squarely on our shoulders alone."

Cracken absorbed her statement, leaning back in the chair as his eyes returned to Cabe. "How are the Masquerade preparations proceeding?"

"All of the in-house security equipment is in place. As we speak, tech teams are erecting both bio and weapon scanners at each entrance. In addition to uniformed security, we'll have NRI agents in disguise..." Cabe shook his head in disgust. "However I still think we should call off the event entirely. It's too much of a risk to take. Especially with the life of the Chief of State."

"The New Republic has a firm policy in dealing with threats. We will not bow to terrorism." Cracken's voice softened somewhat. "Besides, Leia would never have agreed to cancel the event. Proceeds from the Maltesara Masquerade benefit hundreds of charities. It is *the* social event on Coruscant."

"And *the* perfect place for an assassination," Cabe countered.

"It's our job to make sure that doesn't happen." The General handed the figurine back to Daniera. "See what you can dig up at the Vortex... Just be very careful."

"Always," Daniera smiled.

"I'd like to go with her," Cabe said.

"Negative, Major. You and I are going to personally supervise the final security preparations at the Grand Ballroom of the Palace." Cracken stood and walked the junior NRI agents to the door. "We each have our duties to carry out... May the Force be with us all."



Daniera pulled the cloak tightly around her as she stepped into the gloomy corridor. Lumalamps strung haphazardly along the hall offered some illumination, at least the few that were still functioning did. She originally had a hard time believing that an exclusive establishment would be found in such a place, but from what she'd recently learned about the clientele of the Dark Vortex maybe it wasn't quite that strange after all.

Not too far removed from Coruscant's legendary Undercity in location or spirit, the Vortex catered to the movers-and-shakers of Coruscant's criminal element. Rumor had it that anything (or anyone for that matter) could be bought or sold at the club. Of course, not all the patrons could be directly tied to organized misdeeds; just as many were the idle rich and powerful who thought it exciting to rub elbows with danger.

Daniera frowned at the dilapidated hallway, with its leaking hydropipes, fungus-covered walls, and the Maker-knew-what brownish slop covering the pitted floor panels. She knew for a fact that there was nothing in the general vicinity she intended to rub elbows with...

Her forward progress was finally halted by a large onyx blast door in good condition. Flecks of white covered the ebony exterior, giving the overall appearance of a starfield.

The smooth door had no apparent control panel, not even a handhold for that matter. Daniera ran a gloved hand over the surface but could not detect a hidden catch, lever, or other mechanism.

An idea suddenly struck her and she reached into a pouch. After a few moments of fishing around, she realized what she was looking for had vanished.

Daniera cursed under her breath and nearly jumped out of her skin when a soft voice emerged from the shadows and asked her if she was, "Looking for this?"

The man who had asked the question now had the barrel of her hold-out blaster pressing against the underside of his chin. "Step into the light," she commanded. "Now."

Grinning, Love did as he was ordered. "Oooh. There's nothing like a woman with command presence."

Daniera tucked away the weapon, eyes flashing with a fiery mixture of anger and relief. "What are you doing here?"

"Evaluating talent," Love said. "You passed." He handed her the Darth Vader statuette.

"So, the great M'Kyas Love is also an accomplished pickpocket."

"There are many, many talents I excel at."

"Such as skulking about in the shadows?"

Love flashed his best grin. "I graduated top of my lurking class."

She nearly smiled, but merely turned back to the door. A quick twist activated the miniature lightsaber. The minute crimson blade cast its eerie glow on the door and... Nothing happened.

With a grunt of disgust Daniera prepared to hurl the mini-Vader into hyperspace, but Love placed a restraining hand on her arm. "Wait," he whispered. "Look."

Daniera turned back to face the door and watched in amazement as one of the larger stars in the starfield suddenly began to glow a corresponding red.

With a hesitant finger, she reached out and pushed the lit panel. The door rumbled and then slowly began to ascend into the ceiling.

"Good to go," Daniera said. A dim corridor stretched ahead into darkness.

"Watch yourself," Love warned. "And I know it's tough, but let me do all the talking. Women are about a step above slaves in this hole and it can get a little rough."

Daniera paused, her eyes narrowing to slits. "So you've been here before, huh?"

"Yeah, but not for pleasure. One of my acquaintances owns the place."

She put her hands on her hips and glowered. "Then you knew how to get inside all along?"

Love merely grinned at her and then stepped into the Vortex.



Daniera was still blustering as they entered a circular greeting chamber. A large black podium was the only furniture in the shadowy room, though a dozen velvety curtains led to places unknown.

A greasy-looking Twi'lek clad in an expensive black cloak stood behind the podium, eyeing Daniera with a voracious stare.

Daniera leaned over to whisper, "Is it me or does this species seem to just churn out slimy servitors?"

Love grinned and added in a loud voice, "Every good little Twi'lek dreams of growing up to be a major domo for some galactic sleaze-merchant. Isn't that right, Vab?"

"Love. I can't tell you how happy I am too see you," snarled Vab D'Buula, "Because I'm not." The Twi'lek returned his hungry gaze to Daniera, baring yellowed incisors and a pustulated tongue. "However it was extremely kind of you to bring me dessert."

Daniera recoiled from the hideous attendant, but Love walked right up to lean his elbows on the podium. "The only thing you're going to be feasting on is your own brain tails unless you tell me which curtain that spaceslug Mah-Luu is cowering behind."

Unimpressed, Vab reared to his full height. "Do you have an appointment to see the master?"

"Sure." Love reached into his coat. "Here you go."

Vab found himself staring down the very large barrel of Love's very, very heavy blaster pistol. Love put a tiny bit of pressure on the trigger, causing the overpowered weapon to emit an intimidating whine as it charged to fire.

Vab only had to consider the offer for a microsecond. "Curtain number three. Third door to your right."

Love grinned and as he passed Vab, gave the Twi'lek a friendly pat on the shoulder, causing the attendant to noticeably cringe.

Daniera caught up to Love as he drew aside the third curtain. "That was pretty good. Remind me not to play you at sabacc, I'd never know when you were bluffing."

"I wasn't." He nodded back at Vab. "Last time he spent three weeks in a bacta tank."

"I can't believe you!"

"You do what you have to do to get the job done," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder, which she immediately shrugged off. "Listen, girl. Things are going to get intense in there..." He nodded to the door down the hall. "Luu-Mah 'Thermal' Mah-Luu likes to keep his guests off-balance."

After checking the blaster pack, Love finally slipped the gun back into its holster. "Don't want to appear rude, though..."

As they continued down the hall, Daniera asked, "What in the name of Byss is that cannon you carry, anyway?"

"Well, in addition to having an amazing olfactory and auditory abilities, we Latarzians are also highly adept weaponsmiths. Our soul weapons are more than merely guns, they are statements of who we are..." He glanced back at her, a bit embarrassed. "But I won't bore you with our silly littlr customs." He paused for a long moment, then handed her the gun like a cadet offering his weapon for inspection. "Base Calban Model X Heavy Blaster Pistol, with added side blaster sight, Galven Pattern upgrade, Energy Converter Valve adjustment, and half a dozen other little tweaks that few people know about."

Daniera turned the bulky weapon over in her hands, nodding in appreciation. "It's amazing."

Love beamed like a proud father. "I'm thinking of adding a droid brain and vocabulator."

She handed it back. "A talking gun?"

"Yeah," he said as he holstered the blaster. "Neat, huh?"

Daniera could only shake her head. "Oh well. You know what they say... Big gun, little -- "

"Problem hitting the target," Love interjected as they arrived at the correct door. He reached for the control panel, but she abruptly stopped him.

"Hold on a sec," Daniera narrowed her eyes to slits. "Why do they call him 'Thermal'?"

"Oh. You'll see..."



Daniera should have been very comfortable. She was seated in a plush replihide chair, the air filter controls were at the perfect setting, and she was sipping from a warm mug of jin juice (well, holding it on the saucer in

her lap because the last time she took a drink, her hand was shaking too badly to successfully dock with her lips.)

She glanced sideways at Love, who was seated beside her, but his attention was focused on the obese Ubese behind the unique desk. It was apparently constructed purely out of fused bone matter. Daniera counted over two dozen different species represented. And as if that wasn't quite disturbing enough, she now knew how the Mah-Luu had earned his nickname.

The Ubese businessman was holding a silver sphere in his hands, universally recognized as a thermal detonator. Mah-Luu was playing with it, like a being with a nervous habit. Only this habit was making Daniera nervous.



Mah-Luu would slide the firing trigger into position, arming the device's built-in six-second delay. Then a few seconds later, he would thumb the trigger back into its original position, deactivating the device. Unfortunately, at times, Mah-Luu would get lost in thought or caught up in the conversation and his finger would stay slid into the armed position.

Time would tick down quickly and Daniera would hold her breath and prepare to get acquainted with her long-gone ancestors, but then the deactivation would come within what she was sure was the last fraction of a microsecond.

If that wasn't bad enough, Mah-Luu had a tendency to giggle at inopportune times, such as when no one had made a joke. Daniera hoped to the Maker that the Ubese had a malfunction in his vocalizer that was causing the outbursts. Either way, from what she had seen so far 'Thermal' Mah-Luu was altogether not the sort of being you would ever want holding a thermal detonator under any circumstances, except possibly if you happened to be really far, far away... As in the next galaxy.

Actually, Daniera wasn't sure what bothered her more, the thermal detonator or the fact that Love didn't seem the least bit perturbed by its presence.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Love held up the Darth Vader figurine.

Mah-Luu merely shrugged. "Plenty of guests keep souvenirs. I can hardly be expected to recall every being who crosses the threshold of my fine establishment."

"Why not?" Love demanded to know. "You probably have vid cameras rolling 36 hours a day for future blackmail purposes."

"You wound me," Mah-Luu said, switching on the detonator. "Come now, you know I cannot reveal the membership of my club under any circumstances. That's bad business. And my sort of bad business is only good for getting you dead." He started giggling, then switched off the device. Just as abruptly, he re-activated the timer. "Not to mention, I have certain ethical responsibilities as the owner of this establishment. A bond with my customers. One of trust and mutual confidence that what occurs within these walls never sees the harshly judgmental light of day." When he finished his soliloquy, the detonator was returned to standby mode.

"I already know that the being in question had a membership. I even know why. I could smell the cheap perfume from one of your girls all over him."

Daniera's eyes widened, but she remained silent.

Mah-Luu leaned his bulk forward. The detonator was switched on... "Then why, pray tell, are you here, Love?"

"I want to see the girl."

"It'll cost you just like everyone else."

"Fine." Love reached into a pocket.

The Ubese's finger hovered anxiously over the still-active trigger.

Love held up a cred stick.

The detonator switched off. Mah-Luu held out a corpulent hand for the stick and carefully studied the amount held inside. His giggle broke the silence.

On went the detonator. Away went Daniera's breath.

Love locked eyes with Mah-Luu and a noiseless test of wills seemed to stretch on for too many seconds.

Off went the detonator. "Who?"

"Senator Luralon Odaay"

"Ah, yes. The Turian." Mah-Luu touched a recessed button under his desk and the door swung open. 'Thermal' gave a high-pitched giggle. "He just loved Kandi."

"I bet he did."

The cred stick vanished out of sight, but the Ubese still played with the detonator.

Love walked to the door, shadowed by Daniera. "So much for those pesky ethics," he said.

"I have to hand it you, Love. You are still pretty good at what you do... For your age, that is."

Love glared at him. "Is this the part where you give me the recruitment speech?"

Mah-Luu giggled at that. "You? Hah! I'd as soon hire a Luudrian Lockjaw. At least when its eyes turned red, I'd know it was going to turn on me. I doubt you come with any similar safety features." The Ubese focused his gaze on Daniera. "Your companion doesn't say much... I like that in a female." The Ubese leered at her. "What do you say sweetmeat? Looking for a job?"

Already annoyed at having had to play the subservient mute, Daniera strode back to the desk and pointed her hold-out right at Mah-Luu's head. "Are you looking for a third eye?"

The Ubese merely tittered even louder. "Oooh. Feisty, too! I must have her. Come on, Love... How much?"

"She's not for sale, 'Thermal'. And even if she was..."

Daniera gave him a look over her shoulder.

"...You couldn't afford her in a million years," Love hurriedly finished.

Mah-Luu looked annoyed as he tossed the cred stick back at Love. "Even trade. Her for Kandi."

Love shook his head. "That's not an offer."

"You're right," Mah-Luu said, triggering the detonator. "It isn't."

Two burly Rodian bodyguards appeared at the door, dressed in scarlet-colored cloaks and brandishing blaster carbines.

Love glared at Mah-Luu. "We had a deal!"

"So much for those pesky ethics," Mah-Luu giggled as he switched off the detonator.

Daniera had not moved her weapon. "In case you forgot, there's a blaster pointed at your head."

Mah-Luu chuckled, nodding to his guards. "And one pointed at each of yours. With reinforcements on the way. Not the best odds."

Love's right hand was snaking into his coat as he talked. "I always prefer to play the hand I'm dealt."

"Too bad I don't feel the same way." 'Thermal' began to chortle wildly. "House rules, you know..." He touched a bloated finger to another button under his desk, opening a com-line. "Vab, take Kandi for a vacation. Now."

Daniera locked eyes with Love. He gave her a quick wink and then suddenly dropped like a wounded bantha, landing flat on his back. The heavy blaster was already cradled in his hands and before the first guard could lower his own weapon to draw a bead on the now-prone enemy, Love pulled the trigger.

A deafening roar echoed through the room as a pulsing blaster bolt exploded into the Rodian merc, knocking him off his feet and more than a meter backwards. The guard slammed into the wall and crumpled to the ground, his chest smoldering and blackened.

Without taking her eyes off Mah-Luu, Daniera whipped her gun arm around and snapped off three rapid shots into the remaining merc.

Mah-Luu tried scrambling to his feet, but Daniera already had the barrel of the gun re-trained on him. "Oota goota, Tubbo?"

Love grinned as he joined Daniera.

"Rescind that last order," she demanded. "Tell Vab to bring Kandi in here."

The Ubese merchant sneered at her. "Surely you wouldn't shoot an unarmed man..."

"No," Love answered for Daniera, "but I would." And unceremoniously shot Mah-Luu point-blank in the chest.

Daniera cried out in shock, spinning around to face Love. "Love, you are a maniac!"

"Thank you."

"How could you -- "

"Relax, sweets," Love said as he twisted a knob on his blaster back to its original setting. "This thing does have a stun setting, you know."

She looked back at 'Thermal', who had flopped back into his chair and was on the starspeeder to unconsciousness.

"Great, but what about Kandi?"

Love suddenly cocked his head to the side. There was the distinct whine of repulsorlift vehicles. Close by.

Before Daniera could even open her mouth, Love started for the door. He paused in the hallway for a split second, then hurried back into the room and punched the stunned Mah-Luu in the stomach. The thermal detonator in the Ubese's hand popped up into the air, and Love easily plucked the device from its ascent. He then spun on his heel and sprinted out into the hall.

Daniera was right behind him. "Love, you are certifiable!"

"Thank you."

She gestured frantically. "*That* way is a dead end. We've got to go back the other..."

The words died on her lips as she heard the sound of many booted feet approaching from that very direction. "Love! We're about to have some company."

Love was still running for the wall at full speed even as he thumbed the switch to activate the thermal detonator. He sent the device spinning ahead of him and began to count out loud the six-second timer delay.

Closing in from behind, Daniera realized what he was doing. "Stay out of the blast sphere, you lunatic!"

Love waved in annoyance back at her. He had been pacing his run all along and she was disrupting his counting.

"Two... One!" Love cried just as the silver sphere clinked against the wall far ahead of him. There was a small flash and then the detonator's particle field expanded outward at blinding speed and the blast sphere vaporized the wall, most of the ceiling, and part of the floor.

With the newly created observation platform, Love and Daniera had an unobstructed view of the proceedings occurring in the alley below.

A struggling young girl was being dragged into a waiting speeder truck by two more of Mah-Luu's scarlet-cloaked Rodian enforcers. Three rickety-looking speeder bikes, each carrying a Rodian rider, were warming up alongside.



Of course, everyone was now looking up at Love and Daniera in complete surprise. The amazement was very temporary. The two mercs hustled Kandi inside and the speeder truck abruptly made tracks into the Undercity, followed by one of the bikes. The Rodians on the remaining two bikes took aim with their blaster carbines.

Love was already pulling out his hand-held blaster artillery. He quickly aimed and fired twice. The roaring bolts missed their mark, but made the mercs have second thoughts about engaging in a prolonged firefight.

The heavy blaster whined loudly as it recharged, and the lead Rodian took the opportunity to engage in a hasty retreat while his buddy lagged back to provide some cover fire.

Daniera clipped off a half-dozen shots at the lead bike, but the range on her hold-out was limited at best. Most of the blasts fell far short of their mark, so she turned her attention to the remaining Rodian.

Love took careful aim and sent another thunderous blast hurtling toward the departing merc. The shot hit the speeder bike's rear, the concussive force spinning the vehicle 180 degrees and right into the side of a crumbling building nearby. The colorful explosion sent fiery debris raining down over the area.

The second rider wasn't sticking around for another demonstration, but just as he started moving, three of Daniera's crimson bolts slammed into his back. The impacts blew the Rodian right off his vehicle. The now riderless bike shuddered to a quick stop as the automatic kill-switch engaged, leaving the vehicle hovering motionless above the ground.

Love immediately took a running jump off the ragged ledge. He dropped toward the bike and landed with surprising grace atop the empty seat. After taking a second to be impressed with himself, he turned back to shout up to Daniera. "I'll be back for you!"

Love was shocked, however, to see she was no longer atop the ledge. Then he was jostled forward as Daniera landed on the seat behind him.

He turned to look at her with complete astonishment.

Daniera merely slapped his shoulder and barked, "Just shut up and drive this thing."

"Yes, ma'am!" he laughed and gunned the bike's powerful engine...

"You know something, Love, you are crazier than a berserking bantha!"

"Thank you."



"There they are," Daniera shouted.

"I see them." Love quickly accelerated, at the same time dipping the nose of the bike to avoid a large elevated crosswalk blocking their path.

The speeder truck had lost most of its headstart in the twisting maze of decay that was Coruscant's Undercity. The vehicle's size and bulk were hindrances in the ancient highways and twisting corridors. Here the bikes held the distinct advantage.

Love deftly maneuvered the speeder bike through the chaotic jumble of fallen girders, crumbling walls, and overgrown toadstools. Daniera continued taking potshots at the remaining Rodian, who could not shake the tenacious pair from his tail.

The merc twisted around to fire off a blast from his carbine, but the shot went wide. It did, however, slow him down sufficiently enough for Love to pull even with it.

Love one-handed the bike and reached for his pistol, but before he could even slide it from the holster, Daniera let out a strangled cry.

Love whipped his head around to see if she'd been hit, just in time watch her leap from their bike onto the rear of the merc's. It was a close call as to who was more stunned: Love or the Rodian...

"No riders," Daniera grunted and slammed the butt of her hold-out against the merc's neck. Before the dazed Rodian could react, she shoved him off the bike... And into a rotting compost pile below.

Love exchanged a look with Daniera, who pulled her bike back alongside his. "Remind me not to upset you."

"Too late," Daniera grinned as she gunned the bike and tore after the speeder truck.



They found the speeder truck in a dimly lit alleyway a few hundred meters away. Completely powered down, the vehicle was ominously silent.

Both Love and Daniera dismounted and made a careful approach.

The only noise was from the drizzling downpour that suddenly erupted overhead... The Undercity's micro-climates of rising air and condensing moisture often created tiny rainstorms where one would least expect them.

Love wrinkled his nose. The air was thick with the smell of rotting garbage, corroded metal, and stagnant water. There was one other odor that Love instantly recognized...

"Stay here a minute," he ordered.

Daniera was about to argue, but saw the look in his eyes. She nodded quietly. And the rain quietly drizzled down around her...



Love pried open the side door and stepped inside, blaster at the ready. The two Rodian mercs were both slumped over in the cockpit, each one bearing a point-blank blaster hit to the back of the head.

He carefully continued to the back of the truck, and found her sprawled across the floor. Love kneeled next to Kandi's body. The girl was very beautiful; and younger than he'd originally thought.

Love traced a finger over the gold-handled vibroblade stuck in her chest. He leaned down, closing his eyes for a moment as he took a whiff of the dead girl's perfume...

Then he knew.

Love heard a strangled gasp and looked up as Daniera finally entered.

After taking a moment to compose herself, she asked, "Grieve was already here?"

"Probably inside the whole time. Cleaning up his mess." Love stood back up. "It was sloppy to leave witnesses in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

Love tossed her a cred stick. Daniera's eyes widened as she read the amount. "This was in her pocket. Grieve probably paid her to take Odaay to the Kaerlia Queen, although obviously the Senator didn't get what he paid for..."

"But why would Grieve suddenly alter his habits? The blasts those Rodians took don't appear to be generated by the same weapon." She gestured at Kandi's body. "And the girl was actually killed with the vibroblade."

Love passed her as he exited the truck. "Well, you're half right."

"What?"

Love stepped outside into the rank alley, brushing the raindrops that quickly accumulated on his coat. "That was definitely a standard blaster wound. Very standard. As in issue." He flipped one leg over his speeder bike. "And the girl wasn't killed by any sharp weapon, at least not the most obvious one."

"You've completely lost me."

Love shrugged as the bike began to power up. "It's hard to follow in the footsteps of genius."

Daniera mounted her own bike, pushing her damp hair out of her eyes. "So where is it leading us now?"

"I have to confirm a suspicion of mine."

"Then let's go."

Love shook his head. "I need you to go back to Cracken's office. Scan the NRI's reports on all of the victims."

"Our best analysis specialists have poured over those files since this mess began. What makes you think -- "

"Concentrate on the toximorphic screens," Love interrupted. "Don't tell *anyone* what you're doing, understand? And then meet me at the Hold-Out in forty-five minutes." With that, he roared away into the shadows.

Daniera's gaze remained on Love's retreating form, then slowly shifted back to the speeder truck. "That's not all I intend to check on..."



Daniera slipped into General Cracken's chair. Technically only the General was allowed to use the computer, however it was an unwritten rule of Cracken's that any time one of his favored NRI agents needed, they could make use of the powerful machine.

It only took a few minutes for the speedy computer to find the data she wanted. She studied the toximorphic test findings from all of Grieve's victims, but found nothing out of the ordinary. With a shrug, she copied the information into her own datapad.

Daniera prepared to leave, but paused and then sat back down. She began an information search on M'Kyas Love. As she expected, the files were password-encrypted. The NRI's business was keeping secrets, after all. It would be a major policy violation, possibly enough to get her terminated, but she just had to know. Breaking the files then and there would take too long, so... Using her datapad link, Daniera also transferred Love's personnel files into her datapad and put her built-in decryption unit to work on them.

She slid the small datapad back into her jacket and switched off Cracken's computer, plunging the room back into darkness.



Love squeezed through the happy hour crowd and leaned against the bar. After some prudent use of elbow, he managed to clear out a little breathing room. Though considering the various odors emanating from the patrons of "The Hold-Out" (named for the leading cause of death in the joint), that wasn't necessarily a good thing.

The bartender was busy scrubbing a glass as if his very life depended on it, and the man had yet to even look in Love's direction.

Love cleared his throat with Hutt-like intensity but succeeded only in drawing a few looks of annoyance from the drunks seated around him. It seemed that if you weren't a regular here, you were viewed with as much warmth as wombat droppings on a freshly buffed hull.

The bartender's head remained down and the glass was quickly becoming the cleanest object in the entire cantina.

There were many, many things in the galaxy that Love did not like. Being ignored was definitely one of them.

Love slid one hand back over his coat, casually displaying the massive blaster cradled in a replihide shoulder holster. "Who do you have to kill to get a drink around here?"

Silence.

Then someone (obviously unconcerned about personal safety) rudely tapped Love on the shoulder.

Love slowly swiveled his head around.

"I don't like you," hissed a one-horned Devaronian with breath that could drop a bantha at ten meters.

"Yeah, yeah..." Love returned his attention to the bartender. "Save it for the next farmboy, pal. I'm really thirsty right now."

"I have the death mark on..."

"Four systems? Five? Great. Congratulations. Your maternal unit must be very proud. Now do us both a favor and jump yourself out of my personal space." Love shook his head in disgust. "Have you even showered since the Old Republic?"

Love glanced back at the entrance and checked his chronometer. A microsecond later Daniera walked in, right on time, but she didn't look happy.

Her lips parted and Love had the sudden image of turbolaser batteries charging up. He was bracing himself for the worst when Daniera's mouth abruptly shut and a well-manicured hand slid into her jacket.

Love's trusty gut told him he was about to be shot. "Dani..."

Right idea. Wrong direction.

A hold-out blaster jabbed intrusively at the back of Love's head. The Devaronian's fetid breath washed over him.

Love smiled at Daniera as if nothing was wrong. "About time you got here. I was beginning to think you weren't gonna show."

Daniera's eyes widened in surprise. She continued toward him, but did not draw her weapon. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

Love grinned as his left hand slithered in the direction of his powerful blaster. "I knew it... Sooner or later you'll fall for me."

The Devaronian was annoyed, jabbing the hold-out into Love's skull to get his attention. "Idiot! Did you happen to notice I am about to kill you?"

"Actually," Love said as he squeezed the trigger of his still-holstered pistol. "No."

The pulsing blaster bolt erupted from the barrel, tore a ragged hole through the back of Love's coat, then caught the Devaronian square in the chest.

The concussive force blew the alien across the room. The crowd scurried out of the way as the Devaronian came crashing back down between two tables. The impact shattered chairs, sent meals flying every which way, and launched an expensive bottle of Cassandran Choholl toward the bar.

Love tracked the spinning bottle, smoothly snatching it from mid-air.

He raised the Choholl in a toast, then triumphantly put the bottle to his lips. There was a short pause. He shook it once, twice. Not a drop left.

Love sighed, tossing the empty container over his shoulder.

There was an odd ringing sound followed by a jarring thump and the soft tinkle of breaking glass.

Love slowly turned around.

Not coincidentally, the bartender had vanished from sight.

Love leaned over the bar to take a look and winced.

Everyone in the cantina was now staring at him.

"So," Love asked, "who else do you have to kill to get a drink around here?"

As if on cue, an entire table of scarlet-cloaked Rodians stood up and took aim with nasty-looking blaster carbines.

Love paused, looking rather nonplussed. "Uh, that was more of a rhetorical question."

Daniera stepped beside him. "Those look like more of Mah-Luu's hired goons!"

"Oh yeah... Did I forget to mention, he owns this place, too?"

The other patrons had sidled away, leaving Love and Dani exposed. Even drunks know trouble when they see it.

"Then why in the name of Byss did you want to meet here?"

"I just told you." Love's hand was a blur as he tossed a small vial through the air. Blue-tinted liquid sloshed inside as it spun gracefully through the air and landed amidst the Rodians. The vial shattered, spraying the mercs. One second they were standing there ready to shoot... The next second, all six had hit the floor. Dead.

Daniera just stared. "Love, you are a living manifestation of the dark side..."

"Thank you."

Daniera carefully walked over to the bodies.

"Don't worry. That stuff evaporates in a second or two after being exposed to a non-liquid medium. Like the air. Of course, it does its job in a quarter of that time."

She touched the toe of her boot to the broken vial. "What is it?"

"A highly concentrated derivative of the Fex-M3 nerve toxin. They call it Fex-EX. Because of the color of its liquid agent, the stuff is also known as 'Blue Harvest.' Once introduced into the bloodstream, death follows in microseconds."

Daniera look back at him. "But the Rodians didn't have it injected..."

"Exactly. But Fex-EX is so powerful, that mere contact with the skin is enough to cause a massive systemic overload that shuts down the body." Love grinned. "They should be up and about in ten minutes or so, but I wouldn't wish that bodyache on anybody."

"Where did you get it?"

Love nodded his head toward the bar. "I just picked up my order in the back room. And I'm not the only one who made a recent purchase."

"Grieve..." Daniera stared at him. "But how did you know?"

"I didn't. I suspected." Love joined Daniera, picking up a piece of the vial. "I smelled something exotic on Odaay's body. Very sweet and flowery. At first I assumed it was a girl's perfume, probably Kandi's; but when we found her it wasn't the same. But I detected the same sickly-sweet smell on her, too." Love sniffed the vial and then held it out to Daniera. She took a cautious whiff, eyes widening. "The Fex-EX..."

"I guarantee if you check the bodies for that specific genetic sample, there'll be trace elements of the poison in each victim's bloodstream."

"But how was it introduced? The vibroblades?"

"No. This stuff is too fragile. Even with a liberal coating of the Fex-EX, the air would have eaten it away. There had to be a more precise delivery system." Love held up a tiny, near-transparent dart. "I pulled this out of Kandi. Apparently her killer didn't have time to cover up his handiwork this time with us on his trail."

"That explains the huge blaster holes in the other victims. Grieve was trying to get rid of the evidence." Daniera shook her head. "It all fits, but it doesn't make any sense. Why would Grieve suddenly change his methods?"

"He didn't." Love started for the door, glancing back over his shoulder. "You know when you first came in I thought you were going to shoot me."

"Why?"

Love continued out the door. "Oh, no reason."

"This is an excellent bit of detective work, Love, but we're still no closer to our killer."

"Wrong again." He glanced at his chronometer. "I better get going."

"Where?"

"There's an assassination attempt masquerading as a charity ball that I have to attend."

"You mean 'we', don't you?"

Love touched her arm and smiled. "No."

Daniera suddenly felt light-headed. She glanced down at her arm, and the blue liquid smeared there by Love's gloved fingertip.

"Love, you are a --" Her next words faded away with her consciousness and her last memory before the blackness engulfed her was the sound of Love's voice...

"Thank you."



Daniera finally awoke to the piercing beep being emitted by her jacket. Still groggy and aching all over, she fumbled with her datapad. The screen read, 'DECRIPTION COMPLETE...'

She touched the pad and waited for the results to appear.

Moments later, the datapad tumbled from her shaking fingers. Daniera was already sprinting to her speeder bike before the pad had even hit the ground.



The Grand Ballroom of the Imperial Palace was filled to absolute capacity. Moving around in the dense crowd required patience, good timing, and prudent use of elbows. By all appearances, the Maltesara Masquerade Benefit was going to be a rousing success. The elite of Coruscant were all in attendance; politicians, businessmen, society matrons, and even some alien royalty. Vivid costumes and extravagant masks lent an air of colorful elegance to the proceedings.

The New Republic Defense Force stationed around the ballroom were unobtrusive but highly vigilant, as were the costumed NRI agents scattered throughout the crowd.

The thunderous echoes of conversation and laughter suddenly died down at the blaring of regal synth-horns. All eyes focused on the towering double doors of the ballroom's main entrance as they slowly parted.

The Chief of State finally made her entrance, attended by a phalanx of Defense Force guards dressed in bulky ceremonial armor. Leia Organa Solo looked resplendent in a simple ivory gown, star ruby medallion, and an

intricate Alderaanian vizard mask. She began the long journey to the podium, moving down the long greeting line of VIPs.



Down near the end of the greeting line, General Cracken stood at attention, patiently awaiting the Chief of State. Beside him, Cabe adjusted his mask.

"I wonder where they could be," Cracken asked.

"Daniera had better be okay," Cabe said. "I trust that Love about as much as a wampa in a tauntaun pen."

"I have every confidence in him." Cracken glanced nervously at his chronometer. "Well... I used to."



Tucked in the shadows of a large column 20 meters from the receiving line, Love watched the proceedings silently. As the Chief of State moved closer, he slid the heavy blaster from its holster. He noted with satisfaction that the weapon was fully charged.

Good.

Because he was probably only to get one shot at this, and he'd have to make it count.



Daniera ignored the ache gripping her body and sprinted through the palace hall toward the Grand Ballroom. Defense Force guards stationed at the entrance reached for their blaster rifles as they saw her wild approach.

She slowed down a bit as she reached the bio and weapon scanners. Daniera hurriedly waved her identification with one hand and lifted her jacket to show them the holstered hold-out.

"This is an emergency. The Chief of State's life is in grave danger!"

The guards exchanged glances...



Leia Organa Solo had just about reached the end of the line. Luckily, her mask hid the relief on her face. She endured the overly eager compliments of the CEO of Taldan Enterprises, reminding herself as she had done a thousand times tonight that it was all for charity.

As the businessman rambled on, she absently fingered the small star ruby set in the gold medallion. It had been a last-minute gift from a secret admirer, which was unusual to say the least. But it was so beautiful, she could hardly resist. Besides it wasn't a good idea to offend a contributor the day of a charity ball.

She turned and offered a genuine smile to her next admirer... General Cracken.



Love stepped from the shadows and moved through the crowd, the heavy blaster held low by his thigh as he approached the greeting line from the opposite side.

There she was. Love was surprised how beautiful Leia looked up close. She had certainly not lost the regal bearing of her days as a princess.

Her back was partially turned toward him, but Love could see that Leia had just extended a well-manicured hand to General Cracken, who bowed in gentleman-like fashion.

Love shouldered aside an obese Senator in Tusken Raider garb and lifted the heavy blaster pistol...



Daniera pushed her way inside the Ballroom, passing the podium as she headed for the receiving line. She already had the hold-out in her hands as she hurriedly scanned the crowd. Then she saw it...

The Chief of State was greeting Cracken, but neither the General nor Cabe, who stood rigidly beside him, could see Love emerge from the crowd across the way. Organa Solo was blocking their view of Love as he took aim with his blaster.

"New Republic Security!" Daniera screamed at the top of her lungs. "Everybody down!"



Love's finger began to squeeze the trigger. *Just a few more seconds...*

When he heard Daniera's yell, he couldn't believe his ears. Then his sight was the next sense called into question as he saw her break through the crowd, blaster aimed right at him!

"Dani?"

The blaster bolt caught him in the right shoulder, spinning him off-balance and onto the floor. His heavy blaster skittered across the floor.



The stunned crowd had gone deathly silent except for a scattering of screams.

The guards quickly formed a protective shield around the Chief of State. Cracken drew his own blaster, pushing ahead to get a better view of what was going on around him. Cabe remained where he was, flanking the guards behind Organa Solo.

"What are you doing?" Cracken yelled at Daniera, who was standing over the fallen Love, her blaster pointed right at his head.

She spared the approaching General a quick glance. "Arresting Grandyl Grieve for the attempted murder of the Chief of State!"

Love looked up at her in complete shock. "What? It's not me..." He pointed an accusing finger. "It's *him*!"

All eyes turned to the location that Love was gesturing.

Cabe stood there grinning, a small dart shooter tucked in the palm of his hand and pointed right at Leia Organa Solo. "Too late, I'm afraid," he said and squeezed the trigger.

"Cabe!" Daniera screamed. "Nooo!"

Both Cracken and Daniera opened fire, knocking Cabe to the ground, but it was too late. The dart hurtled unerringly toward the Chief of State. One of her guards tried valiantly to step in front of it, but the tiny dart was much quicker.

The room had once again plunged into deathly silence, except for Love, who spoke a single word. "Shield."

The star ruby on Leia's medallion pulsated once.

The dart hit.

More accurately, it hit something, but it wasn't the Chief of State... The projectile bounced off an invisible barrier inches away from Organa Solo's skin. Its momentum irrevocably lost, the dart tumbled harmlessly to the floor.

From his prone position, the wounded Cabe roared in anger. He turned the dart shooter on Daniera and General Cracken. "Somebody's gonna die!"

The thunderous blast caught Cabe in the chest, driving him back across the floor and into a stone column. The would-be assassin slumped over, a massive smoking hole in his chest.

"Somebody always does." Love lowered the heavy blaster pistol and stumbled to his feet with Cracken's assistance. "Thanks, General."

Daniera merely stared at them. "But he's Grandyl Grieve. I saw his records!"

Cracken smiled. "You're right. But he has redeemed himself more times than I care to count. He's been working for us for years now."

"From Grieve to Love?"

Love smiled. "The General's idea. He enjoys his ironic twists."

"I suspected we had a mole in the NRI impersonating Grieve," Cracken said, "and who better to ferret out the fake Grieve than the real one?"

"See?"

"I can't believe this," Daniera said.

"You can't believe it?" Love touched a hand to the small wound on his shoulder. "You shot me!"

"Well..." She thought for a second. "I told you not to call me Dani."

Cracken looked at Love. "What was the final tip-off?"

Love nodded his head toward Cabe's corpse. "He bought a Prax Arms Stealth 2VX Palm Shooter from my store a few minutes before Daniera came in to recruit me for this mission."

"And I'm certainly glad she did," Leia said.

The trio looked up as the Chief of State approached. She ran a hand over the medallion. "This is by far one of the best gifts I've ever received."

"One of my custom little creations," Love said proudly. "A miniature particle shield generator. Only works for a minute or so, but in this case it was all that was necessary."

"Thank you," Organa Solo said, eyeing them each in turn. "To all of you." Leia gave a curt bow. "Especially for livening up this event," she said with a wink then added, a little louder, "Now, if you'll excuse me..."

As the Chief of State left them, Daniera glanced over. "Love, you are -- "

Love braced himself...

"Actually, I'm not sure what you are," she finished.

"Oh, I can tell you that," he grinned, touching his thrumming pistol tenderly to his cheek. "Love is a warm blaster."



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